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SUBJECT: ARMED GROUP ATTACKS HIGH-RANKING PDP DELEGATION

REF: 08 TUNIS 851

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: A Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) delegation led by Secretary General Maya Jribi attending a celebration of the release of a PDP member in Sidi Bouzid July 6 was attacked by a group armed with sticks, stones and knives. Two PDP members sustained minor injuries and the windows and windscreens of three PDP vehicles were shattered. Police present during the attack offered no assistance to the PDP members. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) A high-ranking PDP delegation led by Secretary General Maya Jribi was attacked July 6 by a group armed with sticks, stones and knives in the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid. In addition to Jribi, the delegation included Mongi Ellouz, Issam Chebbi, Ahmed Bouazzi, Mouldi Fahem and Salah Belhaouichet. The delegation was attending a small-scale celebration for the prison release of one of the PDP's militants, Wahid Brahmi, at his parents' home in the village of Hichriya. (Note: Brahmi was sentenced to four years in prison in June 2007 for allegedly spreading false information. The Court of Appeal subsequently reduced his sentence to two years and four months).

¶3. (C) Jribi informed Ambassador and PolOff July 9 that upon the delegation's arrival in Hichriya, they were met by the armed group and the local police chief accompanied by three deputies. The police chief and one deputy were dressed in plain clothes and the other two were in official uniform. Jribi and her group introduced themselves to the police chief and informed him of their unofficial business in the village. Jribi said that several minutes later while talking to Brahmi and his family, they were attacked by the group which threw a barrage of stones at them.

¶4. (SBU) The ensuing violence resulted in minor physical injuries to Ahmed Bouazzi and local PDP leader Lassad Bouazizi. The windows and windscreens of three PDP members' vehicles including Jribi's were shattered. The violence occurred in the presence of the local police chief and his deputy, while the other two officers that Jribi noted upon arrival departed the scene. Jribi stated that the police chief made no attempt to stop the group's aggression, and the absence of action encouraged the group to further violence.

¶5. (C) Jribi and her delegation were forced to seek cover in the Brahmi family home where they remained under attack. Jribi contacted the MOI during the event at 1600 hours and requested assistance from the Minister, but was informed he was unavailable. She then requested to speak to his deputy and the rest of the chain of command but received the same answer. She was subsequently informed that the MOI closed at 1400 hours during the summer. Jribi claimed the attacks stopped two hours after her call to the MOI and more police were visible on the scene although they were not

responsible for stopping the attacks. A police officer entered the home to check on Jribi and company, but Jribi claimed she refused to speak or allow anyone else to speak to him. The delegation subsequently left the village before nightfall escorted by police. Jribi stated that the police escort was not for safety reasons but to ensure their departure out of the governorate.

¶16. (SBU) The PDP released a communique July 6 condemning the violence and held the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) and security forces in the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid responsible. Jribi also held a press conference with local media and one with Al-Jazeera July 7 denouncing the GOT's refusal to intervene and protect its citizens. The PDP in their communique called for a transparent investigation into the event and for civil society and democratic forces to stand against the return of the use of such groups and violence against democratic opposition. Mustapha Ben Jafaar, Secretary General of opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) was present at Jribi's local press conference in show a of support.

¶17. (C) Jribi stated that she was sure the armed group was aware of the delegation's visit to the governorate since telephone and email monitoring of opposition leaders by the MOI is a common practice. Additionally, Jribi reported that she was informed by PDP sympathizers in the village that during morning prayers in the local Mosque, the Imam announced that a PDP delegation was scheduled to arrive in the village and the residents had to "do their duty." Jribi could not corroborate the authenticity of this information but believed it to be true given the events. So far, the GOT has not made any official comment about the incident, but Agence France Presse newswire reported July 8 that GOT sources claimed that PDP members started the fight by insulting and throwing stones at some inhabitants in Hichriya and these inhabitants were forced to defend themselves. Jribi categorically denied the PDP did anything to provoke the incident.

¶18. (C) Comment: The violence directed at the PDP group is a very serious matter. When asked, Jribi said it is not usual for such violence to be directed at the PDP. It is possible, she said, that the decision to attack her group was made by local officials in Sidi Bouzid rather than in Tunis. Regardless of who was behind the attack, however, it is another example of the growing tension in the run up to the October presidential and legislative elections. As we have heard elsewhere (e.g., from PSL leader Mondher Thabet), local GOT and RCD officials are under great pressure to ensure the "right" results from their regions, i.e., an overwhelming vote for Ben Ali and the RCD. While the election is in no doubt, the pressure is predictably encouraging GOT and RCD officials to use intimidation to prevent opposition parties from organizing or conducting outreach. The Embassy will raise this attack with like-minded Missions to discuss possible responses. End comment.

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